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ABSTRACT

Researchers have discovered that learners' language learning beliefs play a crucial role in influencing learners' choices throughout the learning process. Some researchers suggest that understanding learners' beliefs about language learning can help improve their learning skills. Educators in Taiwan have long been concerned about learners' English language learning. However, few studies have been devoted to exploring the relationship between learners' language learning beliefs and their proficiency levels. This study investigated differences in the beliefs that high-English-proficiency and low-English-proficiency learners held about English learning. Data were collected from two high school classes via interviews and surveys. Results revealed significant belief discrepancies between high-English-proficiency and low-English-proficiency learners in five areas (foreign language WP, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation). High-proficiency learners tended to have more positive language learning beliefs than low-proficiency learners. Instructional implications are noted. Two appendixes present sample interview questions and items with statistically significant differences. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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A Comparison between High and Low English Proficiency Learners' Beliefs

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ED 482 579

Among the differences between successful and unsuccessful language learners, researchers discovered that learners' language learning beliefs play a crucial role in influencing learners' choices along the learning process. Some even suggested that to understand learners' beliefs about language learning could help improve their learning skills. Educators in Taiwan have long been concerning about learners' English learning results; however, few studies were devoted to explore the relationship between learners' language learning beliefs and their proficiency levels. This study aims to investigate the differences of the beliefs high English-proficiency and low English-proficiency level learners hold in English learning. The results showed that at least five points appeared significant difference between high English-proficiency and low English-proficiency learners. At the end, instructional implications and suggestions are discussed and suggested based on the study results.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, research interest in second or foreign language learning has shifted from teacher-directed instruction to student-centered learning. As a result, numerous studies have been conducted from learners' perspectives (Wen & Johnson, 1997). Among these studies, issues about individual differences in language learning have been widely discussed. Researchers found that learners hold complex sets of attitudes, expectations, experiences and learning strategies with their language-learning task (e.g., Horwitz, 1987). Language learning beliefs was suggested as having strong impact on the complex variables stated above.

Language learning beliefs are taken as an important role in influencing learners' choices along the learning process (Abraham and Vann, 1987; Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Wenden, 1986, 1987; Mentle-Bromley, 1995; Kern, 1995; Peacock, 1999; Benson & Lor, 1999; Cotterall, 1999). They are also a key element in language learning, which influence learners' proficiency and manipulate learner' learning behaviors and learning outcomes. Horwitz (1988) indicated that if learners preconceived negative or unrealistic ideas about how foreign languages are learned, they might be unlikely to learn the languages effectively.

Several researchers have examined the relationship between language learning beliefs and learners' language proficiency in the past few years. Ehrman and Oxford

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(1995) pointed out that language proficiency was significantly correlated with students' belief that they are able to learn a second of foreign language well. In her study, Mantle-Bromley (1995) attempted to maintain and to improve students' attitudes toward French and Spanish speakers by providing a 9-week Foreign Language Exploratory program. She used the 'Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)' (Horwitz, 1988) to measure students' beliefs about language learning process. The result showed that those who entered their first language class without positive attitude and realistic beliefs about language learning would hinder their progress and achievement in the language study. Moreover, Peacock (1999) in his study found that learners' language proficiency was influenced when students' beliefs about language learning confronted teachers' teaching beliefs. He further indicated that the gap between teachers' and students' beliefs could cause negative outcomes for the learners, reduce learners' confidence in and satisfactory with the class, and make learners become reluctant to participate in communicative activities. In addition, in a comparison of academic at-risk students and proficient learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), Johnson (1998) reported that pre-conceived notions about language learning would be the main reason influencing learners' language proficiency in the EFL classroom. To sum up, because learners' preconceived beliefs about language learning would impact their learning in the language classroom, it is necessary for teachers to know learners' language learning beliefs, as these might hinder or help students' learning processes.

The methods of investigating learners' beliefs have been discussed for several years. Most researchers applied the BALLI (Horwitz, 1985) to survey learners' language learning beliefs. Nevertheless, an increasing number of researchers criticized that this questionnaire might only measure beliefs in theory (Wenden, 1987; Sakui &Gaies, 1999; Benson and Lor, 1999). Wenden (1986) investigated learners' language learning beliefs by collecting students' qualitative data and interview protocols, instead of applying self-reported questionnaire. Sakui and Gaies (1999) agreed that both qualitative and quantitative data are needed. Benson and Lor (1999) pointed out that questionnaire research tends to give only a snapshot of a learner's beliefs without telling us much about their beliefs in greater depth. From these perspectives, it could be concluded that it is better for researchers to combine qualitative and quantitative methods when probing into learners' language learning beliefs.

In Taiwan, teachers and educators have tried to find out the answers to the variables related with the success or failure of students' learning. However, learners' language learning beliefs were seldom taken into consideration. With all the suggestions proposed by researchers in other countries, students' language learning beliefs need to be studied. The first step will be to investigate the differences of the

beliefs held by different language proficiency learners. This study aims to compare the differences of high-proficiency and low-proficiency English learners' learning beliefs about language learning in a senior high school context. In order to obtain a holistic view, both qualitative and quantitative study method was used.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were two classes of second-grade students in a public senior high school in central Taiwan. The school was randomly selected from public senior high schools. One of the two classes was randomly selected from the social science group and the other, from the natural science group. In total, 89 students participated in this study, including 48 female students and 41 male students. Among them, eight students were chosen for interviews: four students being from the social science group, including two with high English proficiency and two with low English proficiency levels, and four being from the natural science group, including two with high English proficiency and two with low English proficiency levels.

Instrumentation

In this study, the researchers conducted the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1985), the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT), and student interviews.

The Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) contains 34 items, which were classified into five categories: Foreign Language Aptitude, The Difficulty of Language Learning, The Nature of Language Learning, Learning and Communication Strategies, and Motivation. It is a 5-point Likert-scale and is used to investigate different learners' language learning beliefs. It took about twenty minutes for the students to complete the questionnaire.

The General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) aims to understand students' English proficiency in term of the four language skills: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, writing, and speaking. It took the students at least two hours to complete the test. The researchers identified the participants who scored the top one third of all the participants as high proficiency learners, and those who scored the bottom one third as low proficiency learners.

In order to investigate the facts underlying statistical information, interviews were conducted. Appendix A shows some example interview questions.

Procedure

The BALLI was administered with all the 89 participants. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the confidentiality of their answers before they started to complete the self-report questionnaire. In doing so, it was hoped that students would have confidence to answer the questionnaires fully and completely. Questionnaires were collected during a class hour with the help of their English teachers.

After answering the BALLI, the participants took the GEPT in other three hour period. They completed the oral, writing, reading, and listening tests. The researchers chose four high English proficiency students and four low English proficiency learners based on the results of the GEPT. These eight participants were interviewed individually later on.

As the researchers interviewed the participants, an interview guide, which was based upon the BALLI, was used to facilitate the interview process. All interviewing processes were recorded with audiotapes and transcribed. Each interview took about thirty minutes.

Data analysis and synthesis

To analyze the data from the quantitative research method, the researchers computed the frequencies of the occurrence of each item in BALLI to know the language learning beliefs of the high and low proficiency learners. Moreover, t-test was performed to see if there existed any significant differences between high and low proficiency English learners' learning beliefs.

To analyze the data obtained from the qualitative method, the researchers transcribed recorded interviews first. Then the transcriptions were categorized according to Horwitz's (1985) classifications of the BALLI.

Finally, the data from the quantitative data and the qualitative data were synthesized. The researchers synthesized the data by first finding out the belief items appearing statistically significant differences between high and low proficiency learners according to the t-test results. Then the researchers looked for the qualitative phase underlying the differences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The results will be presented and discussed in terms of the five categories

Horwitz (1985) summarized: foreign language aptitude, the difficulty of language learning, the nature of language learning, learning and communication strategies, and motivation.

Foreign language aptitude

From the statistical results, Item 16, "I have a special ability for learning foreign languages," showed significant differences between high proficiency and low proficiency learners ($t = -6.64^{***}$, $p < .001$). The mean score from the high proficiency learners was 3.14; while the mean score from the low proficiency learners, 1.83. During interviews, when asked, "Do you think you have special ability for learning foreign languages?" one of the high proficiency learners responded: "I think I may be equipped with some special abilities as to language learning than other classmates. Compared with other classmates, I acquire English more easily and efficiently." One of the low proficiency learners said: "I may not have the kind of ability. I do not know why. I felt easy to learn English before, but I feel nervous now when I read the English articles."

The results showed that high proficiency learners were confident that they were equipped with special abilities for learning English. However, low proficiency learners considered that they lacked the special abilities to learn English well. During interviews, all of the interviewees expressed that classmates' reactions to their English performance somehow influenced their learning behaviors and outcomes. They further explained that their classmates' reactions were mainly on examination results along the learning process. This fact might imply that classmates' reactions on the examination results the learners obtained along the learning process contributed greatly on the learners' learning beliefs. According to Horwitz (1988), when learners form positive beliefs, they could have good expectations about their own language learning capabilities. In this study, learners' beliefs came from the reactions they perceived from their peer learners on their own performance. Although helping learners holding positive language learning beliefs plays an important role in improving learning, assisting learners to manage classmates' reactions toward their own performance might also appear to be a crucial issue in helping learners.

The difficulty of language learning

In this category, the statistical results of two items showed significant differences: Item 4 ($t = -6.49^{***}$, $p < .001$) and Item 5 ($t = -3.56^{**}$, $p < .01$). Item 4 evaluated the learners' perceptions of the difficulty level of learning the target language. The mean

score obtained from the high proficiency learners was 3.52, while from the low proficiency learners, 2.14. High proficient learners seemed to perceive English as easier to learn than low proficiency learners did. During the interviews, when asked, "why do you think English is easy (difficult) for you?" one of the high proficiency students said, "I think it is easy for me to learn, for I am interested in it." However, all the low proficiency learners had negative responses. For example, one of them said, "I think it is a difficult task for me, for I always forget words that I have just recited in recent few days."

The second item which showed statistically significant different results between high proficiency and low proficiency learners was Item 5, "I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well". The mean score of the high proficiency learners was 3.69, and the mean score of the low proficiency learners was 2.75. In responding to the interview question, "Do you think you will ultimately learn to speak English very well?" most high proficiency learners had positive responses, while most low proficiency learners did not. For example, one of the high proficiency learners said, "Yes, I do. I believe if I keep on studying English everyday, I will surely learn to speak English very well someday." One of the low proficiency learners, nevertheless, responded, "I probably am not able to speak English very well ultimately, for I am always speaking poor English. Besides, classmates laugh at my poor speaking whenever I speak English."

From the results, it seems that high proficiency learners tended to perceive English learning as a relatively easy task. Besides, they tended to believe that they would ultimately learn to speak this language very well. Low proficiency learners, however, indicated that learning English was really difficult. In addition, from interviews, the researchers found that the low proficiency learners thought that their limited language abilities would prevent them from speaking well ultimately. The results are similar to Johnson's (1998) findings that "at-risk" learners assessed English as being "very difficult to learn" because they had experienced problems. Yet, high proficiency learners regarded English learning as an easy job since they had achieved success in language courses.

The nature of language learning

In this category, Item 28, "the most important part of language learning is learning how to translate from my native language or translate into my native language", showed statistically significant difference between high proficiency learners and low proficiency learners ($t = 2.02^*$, $p < .05$). The mean score from the high proficiency learners was 2.72, while from the low proficiency learners, 3.20.

During the interviews, low proficiency learners tended to believe in the translating learning more than high proficiency learners. For example, in responding to the interview question, "Do you think that translation is important in language learning?" one of the high proficiency learners said, "Translation is not so important in language learning. I think if I keep on reading or listening to the language materials, I will become good at English." However, one of the low proficiency learners said, "Translation is very important. When I got language learning materials, I always translated English into Chinese in order to help me understand the whole text."

The results showed that high proficiency learners and low proficiency learners held different beliefs as to whether translation plays a crucial role in understanding the target language. From interview results, high proficiency learners tended to believe that learners would know the meanings of the language if they often access to listening and reading materials. Unlike high proficiency learners, low proficiency learners tended to believe translation was an important skill to help them grasp the meanings of English texts. In Taiwan, the grammar-translation method has been a popular teaching method in the past few decades. Learners might heavily rely on the translation skill to process their English learning. Researchers claimed that the cognitive distinctions between high and low language proficiency learners might be traced from their prior learning experiences (Horwitz, 1988; Mentle-Bromley, 1995) and teachers' teaching methods (Horwitz, 1985; Wenden, 1986; Kern, 1995). Accordingly, teachers might need to be very cautious about the use of teaching methods, which are crucial in affecting their students' language learning beliefs.

Learning and communication strategies

In this category, Item 13, "I enjoy practicing English with the Americans I met" showed statistically significant different between high proficiency learners and low proficiency learners ($t = -2.07^{*}$, $p < .05$). The mean score of high proficiency learners was 3.31, and the mean score of low proficiency learners was 2.79. In responding to the interview question, "Do you like to practice English with American when you come across them on the street?" most high proficiency learners tended to have positive responses, while low proficiency learners had relatively negative or backward responses. For example, one of the high proficiency learners said, "Yes, I do. Sometimes, I met some problems when I tried to say something to some foreigners. For example, I was not able to find appropriate phrases or vocabulary to express my thought. To solve these problems, I usually used simple words or made some drawings to show my ideas." Nonetheless, one of the low proficiency learners responded, "Of course not. I am not able to speak any English!"

The results showed that high proficiency learners tended to enjoy practicing English with target language speakers while low proficiency learners didn't. According to the interview data, most high proficient learners knew how to use compensatory language communication strategies along the communication process. However, all the low proficiency learners insisted that they did not know how to communicate with the target language speakers. It seems that low proficiency learners need instructions on language communication strategies.

Motivation

Items in this category showed no statistically significant differences between high proficiency and low proficiency learners. That is, all the participants, high proficiency and low proficiency students, might hold similar motivational beliefs toward language learning. The interview data showed that, for high proficiency learners and low proficiency learners, parents' beliefs about language learning; for example, learning English to get a good job in the future, influenced the learners greatly. It might be argued that due to the homogeneity of the participants' parents, the learners' beliefs on the motivation part did not show statistically significant different. Nevertheless, the results might remind us of the weight of parents' beliefs on the learners'.

CONCLUSION

The data of this study revealed five significant belief discrepancies between high English proficiency and low English proficiency learners. High proficiency learners tended to hold relatively positive language learning beliefs than low proficiency learners. Some facts underlying the belief discrepancies appeared: learners' perceptions of the reactions classmates showed toward their performances, the formation of learners' self-efficacy, the influence of instructors' teaching methods on learners' learning beliefs, the instructions of English communication strategies, and the impact of parents' beliefs on learners' expectation for the target language learning.

To help learners form learning beliefs in a positive direction, some instructional activities and principals are suggested. First of all, to sooth the impact of classmates' reactions on learners' perceptions of their English learning, teachers are recommended to form English learning discussion activities to create the cooperation atmosphere of learning. Researchers have suggested that through persuasive communication or group discussion, learners' awareness toward language learning could be raised (e.g., Wenden, 1991). Sometimes, proficient learners might be asked to share learning

experiences (Huang, 1997). With the sharing and problem solving process, learners might have the chance to form and show the sympathy to each other, from which they might also establish the spirit of encouraging each other in English learning. Moreover, teachers are suggested to incorporate various teaching methods and language communication strategies in instructions. In this, learners might obtain various tools to use in real communication, which might increase their self-efficacy in English learning and use. Finally, teachers are suggested to communicate with students' parents for their beliefs of English learning. In this, not only teachers would understand the students' belief background, but also could parents know more about the ways in helping their children.

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APPENDIX A: Sample Interview Questions

1. Do you think you have special ability for learning foreign language?
2. Do you think English learning is easy for your? Why do you think English is easy (difficult) for you?
3. Do you think that translation is important in language learning?
4. Do you like to practice English with American when you come across them on the street?

APPENDIX B: Items with Statistically Significant Differences

Item description	high mean	low mean	t-value
I have a special ability for learning foreign languages	3.14	1.83	-6.64***
The language I am studying is a very easy language	3.52	2.14	-6.49***
I believe that I will ultimately learn to speak this language very well	3.69	2.75	-3.56**
The most important part of language learning is learning how to translate from my native language or translate into my native language	2.72	3.20	2.02*
I enjoy practicing English with American I met	3.31	2.79	-2.07*

*p<.05

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